



## Challenging Stereotypes – Videos, Pictures and Interactive Inquiry

**Focus principles:** genuine social interaction; exploration and reflection; comparisons and connections

**Focus key competencies:** thinking; relating to others; using language, symbols, and texts; participating and contributing

### Context

Lillian teaches Chinese in an International Baccalaureate Intermediate School located in the North Island. With the emphasis on internationalisation expected by the IB context, languages have an important place in the school's curriculum. They are delivered in three dedicated 20-minute time-tabled slots per week. Lillian (herself a native speaker of Chinese) shares the teaching of her Chinese language classes with a Mandarin Language Assistant (MLA). Lillian has set up the class so that two lessons a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) are taken by the MLA, and one lesson a week (Fridays) is in Lillian's hands. This distinctive working arrangement has given Lillian the space to explore a different approach in her Friday lessons, and these have become opportunities for inquiry learning cycles and an intercultural focus.

This is a Bring Your Own Device school. This helps Lillian to encourage whole class inquiries where all students can see their classmates' interactions as they take place in real time using Google Docs.

### Planning the inquiry

Working with a Year 7 Chinese class, Lillian wanted her students to become more empathetic and aware of different perspectives through a process of comparing and contrasting. She set up an inquiry project whereby, through the theme of sports, she would ask her class to think about different perspectives and to challenge stereotypes. As Lillian planned this series of lessons, she was thinking to herself, "wouldn't it be interesting if I actually showed them some pictures?" These would be images of children in China enjoying sports, located from an internet search in Chinese and in English. Lillian would get her students to explore the differences. When Lillian searched for pictures in English she came up with 'unhappy' sports images, the sense of compulsion, and "competitiveness and things like that ... everything has to be in line ... I'm not seeing any games as much played in the younger generations, everything is like teams and it had to look glamorous ... everything is in order and you don't have your own thinking." She additionally located a video clip which also presented a very regulated process, with the students standing in very neat rows. There was of course the risk that Lillian was "stereotyping them myself." But searching for images in Chinese she came up with a different set of pictures which she saw as reflecting "what the Chinese would like," that is, a happier set of pictures which Lillian thought might represent how China wished to be represented to the wider world.

## Inquiry in action

At the start of the lesson, Lillian gets her Google doc display ready. She asks her students to take out their own devices. She then creates a document called ‘Chinese Inquiry on Sport’. Lillian asks students what language around sports they are familiar with. Students note down on the doc anything they can remember. Everyone in the class can see words and phrases being added in real time. Lillian intervenes from time to time to keep ideas recorded. Rugby, soccer, basketball are added to the list in Chinese. Then, working in pairs, students share with each other five vocabulary items to do with sport, and one sentence. There is a lot of focused activity as students speak in Chinese to each other.

Language knowledge	What we want to find out	What have we learnt
<b>Vocabulary</b> Yun dong-Sports Qiu: Ball Gan lan qiu: Rugby Zu qiu: Soccer Lan qiu: Basketball Lan wang qiu: Netball Shui shang pai qiu: Water polo ping pang qiu: Table tennis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is basketball a popular sport in China?</li> <li>• What sports do Chinese kids play in school physical activities?</li> <li>• Is baseball popular sport in China?</li> <li>• Do they have any sport games/days in China?</li> <li>• What do most people that are not from China usually feel about Chinese school sport?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think that people think of the stereotype that they are forced to do sport but actually they want to do good at sport</li> <li>• You want their children to do well in Chinese sports.</li> <li>• People think that the sport teachers are strict and forcing their students to do their best.</li> </ul>

Lillian then moves on to what she has labelled the ‘what I want to know’ section of the document. This is where her students will have the opportunity to explore, discuss and reflect on similarities and differences. Lillian shows them two short video clips about a sports day at a junior high school in China. Everything is very regulated and military. Then Lillian shows the class several pictures. One set of images has arisen from the search in Chinese, and the other from a search in English. She asks the class to think about differences between the pictures. Students discuss what they see with a partner, and then write ideas down on the Google doc. It seems the Chinese students have been forced into participating, at least with regard to the images that come up when the search is in English. “But,” asks Lillian, “is that the whole picture? How do we know the reality is broader? Do you have Chinese friends? Do you talk to them? What do you think the Chinese want people to think about sport in China?”

In the next lesson, Lillian continues her inquiry. She prompts her students, “what do most people that are not from China usually see about school sport?” Lillian then sets the particular inquiry question for the session - “What do most people from China want others to feel about school sports?” Students discuss this question in pairs. Students are very focused, and begin jotting down ideas in the Google doc. Lillian moves from group to group to help keep students on track and to field questions.

Towards the end of the lesson Lillian brings the group together to share ideas. One student volunteers that it seems that Chinese want people to think they are really good at sport. Another suggests that people from China want others to think that they are not forced to do it. Students then move into groups of three or four. The next questions for inquiry are: “do all schools in China do sports in this way? How do you know? What makes you think that?” Lillian is challenging the stereotype of ‘forced, routined, rigid’. Students discuss the question together and carry out their own independent internet searches.

## Reflecting on the inquiry

As Lillian thought about what she wanted her students to get out of the inquiry, she was aware that she wanted them to notice how orderly everything was. As she reflected on the differences that were emerging between the sets of images, she noted “I think it links deeper into them being a communist country ... I think it is very ordinary for the schools in China to want everything to be regulated.” But she also wanted her students to think “are all Chinese schools like that?” She “wanted them to be able to see that you don’t really identify a group of people as one culture,” but rather as representing a range of perspectives. Thus, “the main point I want the kids to know is that you are not locked up in one culture.” There may be many reasons behind why people act the way they do, and it was important to get her students actually to start thinking about that. She conceded, “I don’t think anyone has asked them those questions before,” but she explained, “that’s me trying to link back into Principle 3.”

As Lillian reflected on how successful she thought the inquiry was, she commented that she liked how her students were responding to the sessions. Lillian found that the students were “definitely a lot more engaged” than when it was just teaching them the language. Lillian was mindful that perhaps this intercultural reflection was “kind of brushing it on the surface,” but this might be “good in itself because I don’t think they’ve ever been asked questions that are like this.” She was aware that, through the prompting and reflection, her students were beginning to notice, and “they can actually say to me ‘well, you know, my friend so and so is from China, they don’t celebrate this and also they don’t do things in certain ways like that.’”

She could see from their discussions that the boys in particular were “really engaged” and “starting to think about all of this.” The girls seemed less so - “the vibe”, as she called it, had definitely switched from the language lessons (Tuesdays and Thursdays), where the girls were more interactive, to the intercultural lessons (Fridays) where it seemed to become the boys’ turn to get more involved. She reflected that perhaps this was because sports was perceived as more of a topic of interest for boys, but she also had to recognise that this was perhaps a case of “me stereotypically thinking that the boys like sports more.”

Lillian concluded, “I think they have taken away with them that there are different perspectives at looking at things.” She commented:

I do fully support that [this] is what language is all about. It’s not just about teaching how to say it, the structure, but it is actually seeing the bigger picture. And I think from my understanding of the different schools that I’ve been in, nobody looks at it from that perspective.

## Challenges in practice

A challenge for Lillian was how to weave all of this intercultural inquiry into the language learning itself. Because the other two lessons in the weekly series are co-taught with an MLA and have a more specific language focus, this made the Friday lessons quite distinct from the other two. This did give Lillian the opportunity to revise and recap previously encountered language input, with the Friday sessions providing opportunities for inquiry into aspects emerging from the language, but this did also seem to create a separation that she was mindful of.

Despite the challenges in practice, Lillian had in fact become quite excited by the opportunity to introduce an intercultural reflective element into her language lessons. As the lead teacher for languages in her school, she commented, “I have introduced it to my entire staff.” That is, “I’ve introduced them to the Newton principles and we’re going to look into how, as a whole school, we can do this.” She reflected, “personally, I think this can take away a lot of fear that teachers have in language teaching.” She perceived that this apprehension came from a belief that “you have to be fluent in the language ... [and] that you can only teach vocab, grammar of the language.” She conceded, “it shouldn’t really be that hard.” The Newton principles had expanded her thinking to recognise that there was a whole lot more to it than just words and phrases. This example of practice illustrates the fact that teachers can do the intercultural work through a student-focused inquiry process. Lillian was now starting to tell other staff about it and getting them on board.

## Final lessons learned

As Lillian reflected back on what she had experienced during the two years of the project, she concluded that “Inquiry Learning is a great way to teach students the culture of the language they are learning.” She commented that, through the interactions she would have with her class “in the actual moment of teaching,” she could really sense her students’ minds being broadened regarding the culture of the target language. Nevertheless, although she would like to continue to have opportunities where she could teach languages through inquiry, giving equal weight to language and culture presented a challenge that she had been unable to resolve to her satisfaction.

## Discussion starters: a focus on getting students to explore

In this story **genuine social interaction** is encouraged, albeit in English. Through sharing ideas in real time through a Google doc, the class engages in **exploration and reflection**, and **comparisons across cultures**. To what extent do you think this inquiry was successful? To what extent do you think it could work in your own classroom?

Lillian expresses concern about limited integration between language and culture. How much of a concern do you think this needs to be? How do you think greater integration between language and culture could be achieved through the topic of sports?

Lillian is also concerned to challenge stereotypes. What kinds of risks are there in these kinds of inquiries to embed stereotypical thinking? How might those risks be managed?

## References (two useful video resources)

A day in a life of a primary school in China\*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53erm2MFrVE>

A day of Chinese high school students: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKtIVBkCHoQ>

## Key Resource

Newton, J., Yates, E., Shearn, S., & Nowitzki, W. (2010). Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching: Implications for effective teaching and learning - a literature review and an evidence-based framework for effective teaching. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

Martin East was the author of this Engaging Example of Practice.

\*The original BBC video used by Lillian is currently unavailable.